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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003119

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/16/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: SADRISTS ABANDON SHIA ALLIANCE, SEEK TO FORM  
NATIONALIST BLOC

Classified By: Political Counselor Matt Tueller. Reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Senior Sadrist CoR member Baha al-Araji told us September 16 that Moqtada al-Sadr (MAS) had ordered the 28-seat Sadrist legislative bloc to leave the Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) and team with disaffected Shia and Sunni elements to form a new alliance to counter the Shia/Kurdish Group of Four and promote Iraqi nationalism. Claiming that this new alliance could comprise at least 70 seats, Araji identified Fadhila, independent Shia, and two Sunni groups as prospective alliance partners. While Araji was unsparing in his criticism of the Maliki government and his Group of Four alignment, he said the new alliance would not aim to topple the prime minister in the near term. He claimed MAS was serious about implementing his six-month freeze order on Jaysh al-Mehdi (JAM) activities and would use the time to weed out bad elements and reorganize JAM, possibly under a new name, but much depended on reduced pressure from Coalition and Iraqi forces. He opined that the CG Petraeus/Amb Crocker testimony was directed at the American, not Iraqi, people, and that while MAS was pleased to hear of Coalition troop draw-downs, he wants a fixed withdrawal timetable that reflects the need to further build up GOI security forces. Araji claimed to have been in Karbala during violent late-August clashes between the JAM and GOI security forces during an important Shia pilgrimage - he said his car had been hit by a RPG in the melee - and blamed GOI police and their Badr militia confederates for starting the bloodshed. We note that the claimed Sadrist departure from UIA is only the latest of at least two previous (and unrealized) threats of legislative "walkouts" of one form or another by the Sadrists. End Summary.

Sadr's Dream Team to Counter Maliki's Group of Four?  
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12. (C) Araji explained that the long-rumored Sadrist departure from the UIA, the sect-based grouping that swept Shia politicians to power in 2005, was ordered by MAS in order to promote Iraqi nationalism and to move away from the type of sectarian politics now practiced by the Maliki government. He defined Iraq's primary crisis as mutual mistrust among Sunni, Shia and Kurds, and a deepening sense of sectarian identity at the expense of Iraqi identity that has been accelerated by the mistakes of the Maliki government. Araji, Chairman of the CoR's Legal Committee, confided that for the first time he has begun to fear for the future of Iraq and to question the ability of Iraqis to move beyond sectarian strife and re-establish communal trust. He said the Sadrists want to form a new CoR alliance with anyone, regardless of sect, who wishes to promote Iraqi national identity. He claimed that this new alliance could comprise at least 70 seats drawn from the following groups: 28 Sadrists; 15 seats from the Fadhila Party, which broke with the UIA earlier this year; 20 independent Shia

legislators, including prominent CoR member Qassim Dauod; and Sunni legislators drawn from Saleh al-Mutlaq's National Dialogue Party and disaffected Tawafuq bloc members. Although Arajī spoke of this alliance as though it were already formed, it remains unclear whether the Sadrists can corral so many disparate groups and personalities into a cohesive bloc. A Fadhila source, for example, told us his party would join with Sadrists as before on issues of common cause but would not necessarily enter into a formal alliance. The Sadrists have made at least two previous (and unrealized) threats of legislative "walkouts" of one form or another.

13. (C) Arajī stressed that the immediate aim of the new grouping was to break with sectarian politics, not to topple the Maliki government: he added, however, that the Sadrists found it hard to justify continued presence in the UIA in light of Maliki's sectarian policies and the incompetence of his government. He said Sadrists would not seek to block candidates to fill ministerial positions vacated by Sadrists earlier this year so long as such candidates were independent technocrats. The soft-spoken and nattily-attired Arajī intoned that the Group of Four protected its own interests over national interests and that Maliki was poorly-advised by an incompetent staff and in dispute with all parties other than the Group of Four. He warned that Maliki's divisive use of sectarian politics could lead Iraq to a Lebanon-like situation, and claimed that USG backing was Maliki's only real source of strength. He lambasted Maliki for contributing to the weakness of provincial governments, stating that new provincial elections are badly needed because current provincial governments lack capacity and provincial councils are filled with unqualified people who were elected because of party or sect affiliation and not

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because of personal qualifications (he said the same criticism holds true within CoR ranks). Arajī complained that new provincial elections could be organized within two months if Maliki wanted to move Iraq forward, but his government has not cooperated. Ordinary Iraqis want security and jobs, and Maliki has delivered neither.

14. (C) When asked for a reaction to the CG Petraeus/Amb Crocker testimony and the POTUS announcement of a troop draw-down, Arajī said the overall USG view was "more realistic" than previous USG status reports on Iraq. He opined that Gen. Petraeus was more convincing because the Ambassador gave undeserved credit to Maliki for progress that he and his government had not really achieved. He said MAS was pleased to hear of Coalition troop draw-downs, but wants a fixed timetable that reflects time needed to further build up GOI security forces. Arajī conceded that such forces are not ready at present to assume full security responsibility, and was particularly critical of the Iraqi Police.

Sadr Serious About JAM Stand-Down Order

15. (C) As a senior Sadrīst with links to the JAM Arajī averred that Sadr's order of a six-month freeze on JAM activities was a serious gesture designed to remove "criminal gangs" from JAM ranks and to reorganize the militia, possibly under a new name. He said Sadr needed calm from the GOI and Coalition Forces in order to implement this order, and he stated that the situation was holding thus far. We replied that we have reduced operations against JAM and were also considering a detainee release but that JAM also needed to reduce violence. Arajī said that JAM had provided the GOI with a list of "criminals" within the organization three days ago. He complained that the MNF frequently arrests and attacks people based on false information. As an example, he handed us an Arabic version of a September 13, 2007 MNF press statement regarding the arrest of an Iraqi Army battalion commander identified as "a member of a criminal gang belonging to Baha al-Arajī." Clearly offended by this

"disgrace," Araji denied culpability and insisted that he barely knew the detained ISF officer, who happened to be from his hometown. (Note: Despite al-Araji's efforts to distance himself from the report, there is a Khadimiya-based JAM unit that bears the name "The Baha al-Araji Brigade" in his honor.)

#### August Karbala Mayhem: I Was There

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¶6. (C) Araji told us he was in Karbala during the August Shia pilgrimage festival that was marred by serious bloodshed attributed primarily to JAM. While acknowledging that JAM had a role in the violence, Araji blamed Iraqi Police (IP) for starting the bloodshed. He said the root of the trouble was poor IP planning in forcing tens of thousands of pilgrims to enter the shrine area through two checkpoints which were inadequately staffed. When impatient pilgrims began to protest, the IP did not use non-lethal means to quell the disturbance but immediately opened fire on the crowd. He further alleged that the IP and Ministry of Interior security forces present were comprised mainly of personnel from the Badr militia, JAM's bitter rival, and that this also contributed to the violence. He claimed the Iraqi Army only arrived when PM Maliki visited Karbala long after the fighting had ended. He also noted his car had been attacked with an RPG during his Karbala visit.

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